

Duxbury: An Experiment in Stasis Part II

By DAVID RAPIER

World's Longest Car-Supporting Uncovered Wooden Bridge

The Duxbury Bridge was completed on Oct. 12, 1892, enabling for the first time access to the beach without having to go through Marshfield. The creation of the bridge was due to the efforts of one of Duxbury's richest inhabitants, William J. Wright, who had hoped to sell houses on both sides of Duxbury Bay. The project, and a couple of houses, fell through during the next major storm in the area when it became evident that the beach was not very safe to build on. The beach itself once had grass on it and was used as a pasture for cows in the early winters so they wouldn't starve. After all the grass was grazed away, the sand started flying away as there was nothing to keep it down anymore, and conservation efforts were required to keep the beach from disappearing. The center strip of the beach is now covered with beach grass and discarded Christmas trees, which effectively prevent, or at least inhibit, erosion. The beach itself is owned by Duxbury's Pratt family as a trust designated for the pleasure of all people. A few times this last century, the state has tried to take over the beach, but has never managed to get beyond the protests of the townspeople. The bridge was originally built with horses and carriages in mind, but with the advent of the automobile it was found to be solid enough to stand the stress of tons of metal going over it. There is a 10 mph speed limit on it, probably as much for the protection of the pedestrians as for the protection of the bridge itself.

Real industries and businesses in the town slowly died out and were not replaced. An old mill was sacrificed by some high schoolers in the Fourth of July celebrations at the turn of the century, burned up but nobody minded since it had been inoperative for a long time. The Ford Emporium burned down in 1921, taking with it many relics of Daniel Webster. The railroad, which once had been sending 12 trains a day through Duxbury, folded in 1939, and the tracks were removed or forgotten about and built over. Of course Duxbury's 3 train stations went with it. Prohibition in 1920 stirred up some business in town, as there were many rum runners, but even that Amendment was repealed. The town was left to gain more important items in the 20th Century: roads and churches.

Route 3A used to be the main route to Boston. Parts of it date back to 1623, at which point it was known as the Old Duxburrough Path. It twists and winds, guaranteeing that those in a hurry will find some other route. Much to the chagrin of the long-established local inhabitants, another route, Route 3, was built which cut Duxbury right down the middle. This highway facilitated access to Boston, which was shown in the town by a dramatic increase in the number of requests for new houses. Most of the new developments were in the West Duxbury area. The new highway served to underline and further a rift that had developed within the town. The inhabitants of the northwest and western sections of town had moved in relatively recently, and were unfamiliar with the history that enveloped the land on which they lived. These people thought of themselves more in terms of the South Shore and Boston than Duxbury. In the 20 years since the creation of Rte. 3, this rift has been healed over and the town's xenophobia is limited to the even newer newcomers. Once in a while the state suggests that it would be nice to straighten up Rte. 3A, but again the townspeople are adamant about its being kept the way it is now.

As in most towns, churches have multiplied over the years. Before 1828, the one church was the same denomination as were the Pilgrims, Brownites. After that point, other churches began to sprout up. Due presumably to the baneful influence from Boston, a Unitarian Church was built, which is right next to the present town offices. A Wesleyan Methodist church also began on Washington St., but in 1843, 20 years into its life, the church was split over the issue of slavery. (I have been assured that there were no slaves in Duxbury.) A substantial part of the congregation left, and Samuel Sprague, a wealthy man who happened to own the land directly in front of the Methodist Church, decided to build another church for the 53 members who were against slavery, directly in front of the old church. The new church, desirous of maintaining some connection with its Methodist background, yet officially disowned by the denomination, called themselves Wesleyan Congregationalists. The church now belongs to the United Church of Christ. A Universalist church also existed on Washington St., but merged with the Unitarian Church, leaving their old building to be used as a house. In the last 40 years, Duxbury has acquired 2 Baptist churches, a Catholic, a Nazarene and a Christian Science Church. The proliferation of churches marked the decline of serious Christianity, as the people could choose a church to fit their own doctrine.

1954: Scallop Capital of New England

By 1954 there were quite a few poor people in the town. One day, somebody noticed that a huge number of scallops had washed up on Duxbury Beach. For the next 2 years, Duxbury had a huge surplus of scallops. Anyone not employed could take a rake to the beach

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and fill buckets full of scallops and sell them at steadily increasing prices. The town gained \$50,000. In 1955 the scallops finally ran out. But the people who had needed the most had received it.

3rd Highest Per Capita Alcohol Consumption in U.S.

Duxbury has a problem. The problem has been building up over its history and just recently has climaxed in the remarkable above statistic. The drinking ability of the inhabitants of Duxbury is not a recent phenomenon. The Duxbury Clipper (1975, May 8) printed an article about old stores in Duxbury and mentioned one store which was used for groceries for the 20 years before and after the beginning of the 19th Century, "The amount of rum consumed in those days was impressive." The article goes on to explain that every family that came in for groceries bought a good sized bottle of rum with almost every purchase. One can imagine that it must have been hard working at the shipyards all day.

Alcoholism is seen mainly as a problem with the young people of Duxbury. It is admittedly a problem experienced by the young people of Duxbury, but the problem is caused by the dreams of former inhabitants. An idyllic atmosphere has been established in the town. In the 1940's, Duxbury's citizens of high standing determined to make the best possible school system for their children, and it was arranged at the town meetings that 60% of the income of the town would go towards the school budget. The result is that the Duxbury school system has superb facilities, and for the graduating class of 1981, only 2 persons made it into the Ivy Leagues. The town planners, in an effort to preserve the town's atmosphere, allow very few businesses to operate in the area. There was recently a proposal offered to the town for a shopping plaza on the outskirts of Duxbury, removed enough so as not to bother people with the crowds, yet near enough to give the town some kind of revenue besides land tax. The proposal was voted down at the town meeting, and the plaza was built just on the other side of Duxbury's border, close enough to bother the inhabitants with its crowds and just far enough away to pay its taxes elsewhere. The result of such meticulous planning is that Duxbury's students, whether they want to go to some movie or a fast food establishment such as McDonalds or Dairy Queen, have to go to a neighboring town. In fact, from what I as a resident and recent student have experienced of Duxbury's social life for teenagers, the only way available to spend an evening if one is not involved in a school activity is to go to a party or a Bible study. One is almost guaranteed of finding both on any given night.

The following are some samples of opinions concerning Duxbury in various parts of its history. One woman, Pauline Winsor Wilkinson, looks back on the Duxbury of 1840 from the viewpoint of 1920.

"On looking back at Duxbury 80 years ago one sees a great change. In those days the town was occupied only by natives and life there was simple and plain. Once in a while it would be startled by some scandal or a runaway match, but on the whole it was very respectable and remarkably free from squalid poverty or disreputable places."

That marks the beginning of her article. The end is almost tearjerking.

"Duxbury is changed, perhaps for the better. Now it has its yacht club, its tennis courts, and its golf links, its tea houses and gift-shops. The roads are good and automobiles fly hither and thither constantly. More and more the old houses are being bought and remodeled and new ones built with electric lights and every convenience. ...The town is full of new names. ...If the time ever comes when the earth sidewalks with grassy edges are replaced by asphalt with stone copings, I am thankful I shall not see it. It is the Old Duxbury I remember and love."

Duxbury's town historian, Dorothy Wentworth, remembers differently. In a description of her husband's childhood years, she depicts an account which took place in 1919 when her then-future parents-in-law went out during the evening to dance at one of Duxbury's fine hotels (all of which have disappeared by now, of course). The nursemaid would allow the boy to play near the hotel where he could see his parents dancing. "If they went out, of course he didn't go. But he got down here in the long warm summer evenings, and I suppose the nurse maid wanted to get out too -- they hated it. In fact, my mother-in-law had to get girls from an orphanage sometimes to stay with her because others would quit; they couldn't stand it down here, it was so quiet."

The Rev. Canon Robert Merry, another authority on Duxbury's history, suggests that the problem of alcoholism occurs when the people seek an escape from life, and religion has lost its power. Mrs. Wentworth has a slightly different interpretation: "Alcoholism is the bane of affluence." The property taxes in Duxbury are so high that only well-off or misplaced people will live there, which is of course one of the reasons the taxes are so high. The people who proposed to preserve Duxbury for the sake of the rich summer residents accomplished their task. Duxbury seems as if it will forever be the perfect example of a comfortable bedroom town, protected from overcrowding by ordinances such as each residence having to have an acre of land around it, and as each house containing at the most most one family unless the house is more than 20 years old. An example of the degree to which the vision of happiness has been attained is seen in the police record of 1970, where only one "break-in-and-entry" was committed the entire year. The problem that Duxbury has is that people insist on raising children there. Duxbury is not a town for

children because the 3 essential elements of their destruction -- affluence, boredom and parental examples -- are present in abundance.

The Duxbury Clipper reflects the serenity of the people who keep Duxbury the Utopia it is. But when a town makes no commitment to change, a change will come that has not been instigated by the town. The Rev. Merry suggests that Duxbury will "join the human race" about the turn of the next century. Until Duxbury is forced to change though it remains perfect on the surface, content to rest on its laurels and fortunes. But the bottles are piling up.